Jack Roberts

Behind the coral it's the oldest house in Dade

Roberts

When B. W. Anderson, a general contractor, bought a ramshackle house at 1145 NW 8th Ave. several years ago he wanted it for the land only. "He figured he'd rent the place for awhile and then build an apartment house on the property," his wife said.

But before Anderson could get around to tearing down the house he started getting letters from people connected with Dade Heritage Trust, Inc., a nonprofit group which tries to preserve historic buildings in this area.

The astonished Anderson found out from Heritage Trust workers he had the oldest house in Dade County. It was built in 1866 by William Wagner, a Civil War veteran from South Carolina. The roof beams in the house were hand-hewn from tough, Dade County pine. The heavier timbers for the sub-flooring were floated here on a flatboat from Pensacola.

One researcher who wrote about the house said the interior walls were covered with tightly stretched burlap and covered with so many coats of paint the burlap was one solid piece.

Did Anderson rush out and restore the oldest house in Dade County? No sir, says his wife. The place was beyond repair and the City of Miami had condemned the building. Anderson gave the building to the Heritage Trust. But now the history buffs are faced with finding a place to move the house and there's a chance that rapid transit might come plowing through the Highland Park neighborhood.

Sam Boldrick, president of Heritage Trust, says there have been numerous conferences on the matter and one suggestion is to dismantle the house, piece by piece, replace rotting wood and later reassemble the pioneer house inside of Dade County's new historical museum when it's built in 1980.

Boldrick says he feels the building should be moved to some piece of public land and be put to practical use when it's restored.

"You can't make a museum out of everything," says Boldrick, pointing out that when the Trust restored the home of pioneer, Dr. James Jackson, it became Trust headquarters and will also be used by the Dade County Medical Association. The Trust also is trying to save the original Miami Hospital building at a cost of some $300,000. The building looks like the Alamo in Texas and has been nicknamed just that. Trust members envision it as becoming headquarters for volunteer workers at the giant medical complex.

But getting back to Miami's first house, moving and restoring it might not be so difficult. It looks as if much of the house is coral rock construction, but this was added by Benjamin Cassell Sr. in 1925. When the coral rock is peeled away, the original pine house will be left standing.

Benjamin Cassell Jr., a Miami telephone company employe, says he remembers how all the neighbors came and stayed at his parents' house during the disastrous 1926 hurricane. "They knew that house wasn't going to budge and it didn't."

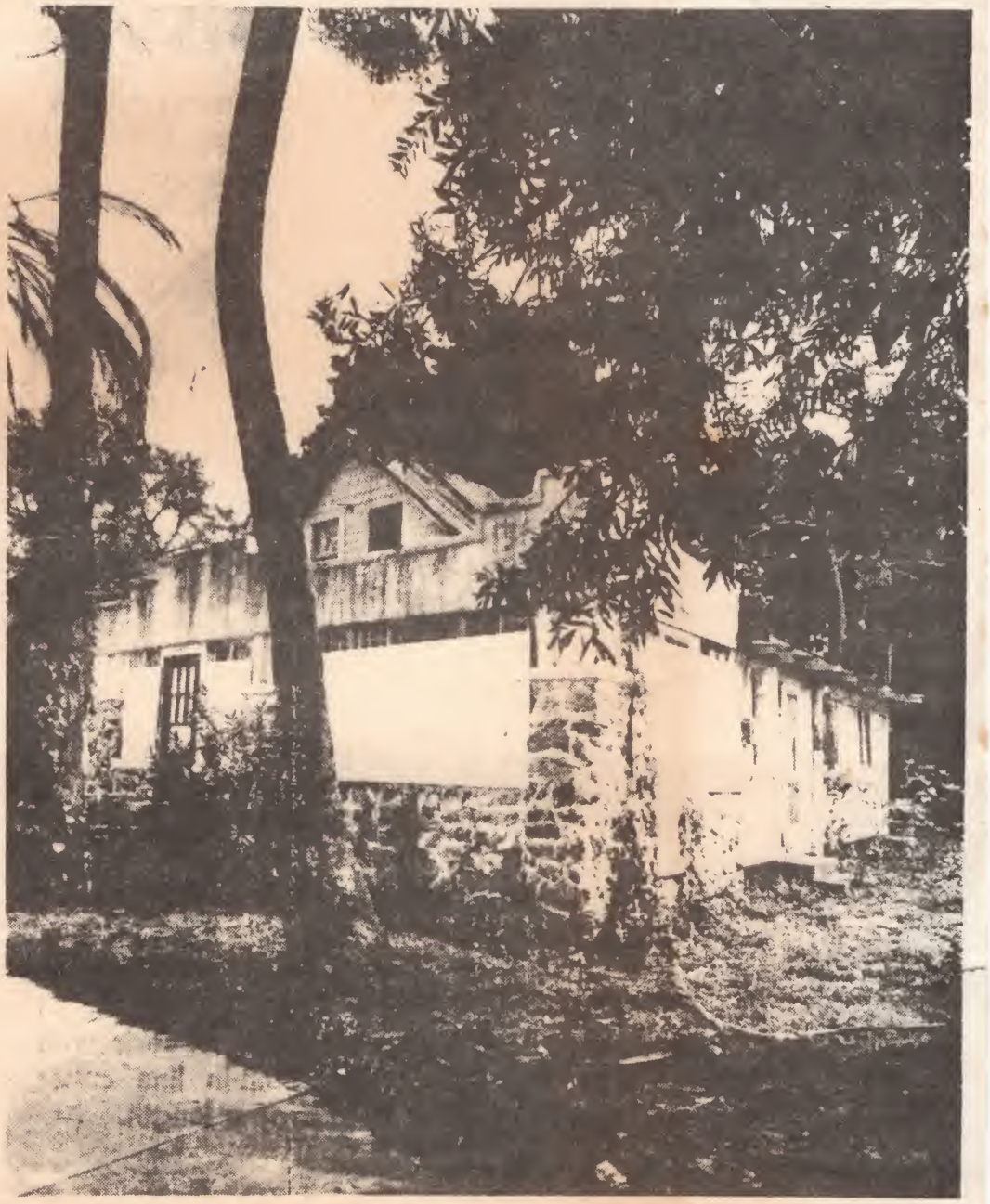
The Cassells bought the house from Adam Richard, a descendant of Wagner, the original builder. One account says the Cassells were actually given the house and they moved it onto a lot they had purchased some 50 feet away.

I got interested in the oldest house story after reading that the Heritage Trust will be holding an antique show and forum next Friday, Saturday and Sunday at the Army Reserve Center at the University of Miami. The trust has so many projects, it must raise money.

We need the Heritage Trust here. This is the blow-it-up, haul-it-off capital of the United States. They won't let a first-class building live 50 years here.

One impossible dream on the Heritage Trust's list is the old Miami News Tower at 6th Street and Biscayne Boulevard. I left many memories at that old place and wish to this day it was still home base. It's a replica of the Giralda Tower in Seville, Spain, built during a period when people put beauty before practicality. The Trust thinks of the place as the Freedom Tower because so many Cuban refugees were cared for there.

Whatever, I could still call it The News Tower under my breath.



This house at 1145 NW 8th Ave. was built in 1866 by a Civil War veteran